For October 3, 1982

T-8

THE FLIES: REPLICA OF THE DEAD MAN

Horacio Quiroga

On clearing the forest last year, the men felled this tree, whose trunk lies at full length pressed flat against the ground. While its fellows lost much of their bark when the clearing was burned over, this one retains its own almost intact. There is only a carbonized strip all along its length that speaks very plainly of the action of the fire.

This was last winter. Four months have passed. In the middle of the clearing lost on account of drought[1], the broken tree lies always in a wasteland of ashes. Sitting against the trunk with my back supported by it, I too am immobile. At some point in my back my spine is broken. I fell just there. I remain seated -- or rather broken -- against the tree.

Beginning just a moment ago, I have been hearing a steady buzz -- the buzz of the medular lesion -- which appears to flood everything and in which my breath seems to flow out. I can no longer move my hands and can hardly stir the ashes with a finger or two.

I acquire at this moment the supreme and extremely clear certainty that, at the level of the ground, my life is awaiting the instantaneity of a few seconds to flicker out all at once.

This is the truth. Never has a fuller truth presented itself to my mind. All the others float, dance in something like a far-off reverbration of another I in a past that does not belong

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to me. The single perception of my existence, flagrant like a great blow delivered in silence, is that a moment from now I am going to die.

But when? What second and what instant are those in which this exasperated consciousness of still being alive will give place to a tranquil corpse?

Nobody comes near this clearing; no forest path leads to it from anyone's property. For the man sitting there, as for the trunk that supports him, the rains will follow, wetting bark and clothes, and the sun will draw lichens and hair-like mosses[2], until the forest sprouts up again and unites trees and ashes[3], bones and shoe-leather.

And there is nothing, nothing in the serenity of the environment that proclaims and cries out such an occurrence! Rather, across the trunks and black limbs of the clearing, from here or from there, whatever may be the point of observation, anyone may contemplate with perfect clarity the man whose life is at the point of ceasing among the ashes, drawn like a pendulum by enormous gravity: so small is the place that he occupies and so evident is his situation: he is dying.

This is the truth. But for the obscure resisting animality, for the heartbeat and the breath menaced with death, what is the truth worth before the terrible anxiety over the precise instant in which this resisting life and this terrible psychological torture will explode like a rocket, leaving as sole residuum an ex-man with his face set rigidly for ever after?

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The buzzing continually increases. A veil of dense darkness, in which green rhomboids stand out, is now hovering over my eyes. And immediately I see the walled doorway of a left-handed Moroccan,[4] through one half of which a herd of white colts rushes out, while through the other half a theory of decapitated men runs in.

I want to close my eyes and can no longer do so. Now I see a hospital room where four doctors, friends, persist in trying to convince me that I am not going to die. I watch them in silence and they burst out laughing, for they follow my thought.

"Then," says one of them, "No other proof remains for you but the fly-cage. I have one."

"Flies?"

"Yes," he answers, "Green-tailed flies. You are not ignorant of the fact that green flies smell the decomposition of flesh long before the decease of the subject occurs. With the patient yet alive, they come, sure of their prey. They fly over it without hurry, yet without losing sight of it, for they have already smelled its death. It is the most effective known means of arriving at a prognosis. On this account I have some whose sense of smell has been refined by selection, which I rent out at a modest rate. Where they enter, the prey is sure. I can put them in the corridor when you are alone and open the door of the cage, which, let it be said in passing, is in the form of a little coffin. You will need to do nothing but keep your eye on the keyhole.[5] If a fly comes in and you hear it buzz, be sure that the others too will find the way to you. I rent them out

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at a modest rate."

Hospital? Suddenly the whitewashed room, the medicine chest, the doctors and their laugh vanish in the midst of a buzzing ...

And suddenly, too, the revelation comes to me: The flies!

It is they who are buzzing. Since my fall they have come without delay. Drowsing in the woods because of the fiery heat of the place, the flies have become aware, I don't know how, of sure prey in the vicinity. They have already smelled the approaching decomposition of the seated man, by signs we cannot read, perhaps in the exhalation through the flesh of the cut spinal medula. They have come without delay and are circling without hurry, measuring with their eyes the proportions of the nest that fate has just provided for their eggs.

The doctor was right. Their job couldn't be more lucrative.

But the fact is that this desperate anxiety of resistance is being assuaged and is giving way to a blessed weightlessness[6]. No longer do I feel myself a fixed point on the earth, rooted to it by the heaviest torture. I feel flowing from me, like life itself, the lightness of the surrounding vapor, the sunshine, the fecundity of the hour. Free of space and of time I can go here, there, to this tree, to that vine[7]. I can see, far off now like a memory of remote existence, I can still see, against a tree-trunk, a doll with lidless eyes, a scarecrow with glassy stare and rigid legs. From the womb of this expansion that the sun dilates, crumbling my consciousness into a billion particles, I can rise and fly, fly ...

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And I fly, and I alight with my companions on the fallen tree, under the rays of the sun that lend their fire to our work of vital renewal.

FOOTNOTES

1. Clearing lost on account of drought: Apparently the clearing was made for the purpose of planting some crop which was lost due to drought. Sylvanus G. Morley in The Ancient Maya describes the method used by both the ancient and modern Maya to plant maize. They cut the trees and brush in an area of forest and burn off the debris before sowing their seed. Though this story would be located not in the Maya area but in northern Argentina or thereabouts, I take it that a similar method was being used.

2. Hairlike mosses: The word is "cabellos", literally hair, but the dictionary also gives the meaning "maidenhair", and I have a vague recollection that this is some primitive plant of hairlike appearance, perhaps a moss.

3. Ashes: Literally, potash.

4. Left-handed Moroccan: The expression is "zoco marroquí". "Zoco" may mean left-handed, or one-armed, or maimed. Of course this doesn't make sense. The passage may be intentionally halucinatory (also note "theory of decapitated men"), or it may be that the expressions "zoco marroquí" and "teoría" may have some local or slang meaning not to be found in the dictionary.

5. Keyhole: Literally, lock, but I think he must mean that

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the fly would come in through the keyhole.

6. Weightlessness: "Imponderabilidad", which according to the dictionary would mean imponderability; but I think the author must be using the word in the etymological sense, to mean weightlessness.

7. Vine: Literally, liana, which I suppose to be a kind of vine.

COMMENT. What I liked about this story was the way the author lifts, at the end, the dark cloud of despair and death to show us hope and renewal. To me it was very effective; I don't know if you will react to it the same way.

The theme -- death of a man as a source of life to lower organisms; symbolically, renewal of life in general -- is one that I've encountered before; though for all I know Quiroga may have been the first to use it, since he wrote some time ago (he died in 1937). But in any case I think he handles it more effectively than I've seen it handled before.

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